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ABSTRACT

Traditionally, little attention had been paid and little research has been done pertaining to the strengths, rather than the deficits, of the African-American family. This study, guided by a holistic perspective that makes families the central unit of analysis and focuses on their strengths, investigated which variables are associated with positive outcomes and strengths in African-American families. The study also attempted to determine which existing models or theories best depict the African-American family from a positive perspective. The research questions were: (1) How do African-American families view themselves in terms of their strengths?; (2) How do African-American families view themselves in terms of weaknesses?; and (3) What factors are perceived by African-American families as being important to help their children succeed? Twenty Arkansas families defined as successful were interviewed. Data indicated that African-American families hold in high regard the same values, morals, and principles as families of other ethnic groups. These families are dedicated to maintaining family stability, have high expectations for their children and themselves, and are involved with community and civic organizations that promote the improvement of African-Americans. All responding families stressed the importance of the role of the extended family in providing a historical context and nourishment to family life. (Contains 17 references.) (EV)

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Middle-Class African-American Perceptions Regarding Their Strengths

Wynona Bryant-Williams, Ph.D. & Ronald Fannin, Ph.D.

Very little attention or research has been done on the strengths of the African-American family. The traditional approach has been to depict the African-American family in very negative ways. A content analysis of 10 key journals in sociology and social work revealed that articles on African-American families comprised only 3% of 3,547 empirical studies of American families published between 1965 and 1975 (Johnson, 1981). Despite social work's emphasis on family issues, only one article on African-American families was published in two major journals. An analysis by Peters and Massey (1983) of the special issue of Family Relations (October, 1980) entitled "Family Stress over the Life Span," covered topics that were relevant to the experiences of African-Americans and other minorities, Peters and Massey found that even in areas where African-American representation is higher than the average for American families - such as unemployment and divorce/separation - the three relevant articles did not indicate that African-Americans were included in their sample. Additionally, in this same issue, the five articles under the section, "Social and Intervention" did not include African-American families in their discussion.

These facts coupled with a lack of understanding due to the news media, along with many social scientists (Moynihan, 1965, Banfield, Gilder, 1981, Murray, 1984) has help to contribute to the one sided view regarding African-American families. The traditional theoretical frameworks used to depict African-American families is also cited as a contributing factor for depicting African-American families in negative ways. The traditional frameworks used to portray African-American families has the following deficiencies: (1) it reflects a superficial treatment of African-

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Americans families. African-American families are not considered to be an important unit of facts and thus are omitted entirely or treated peripherally. This perspective assumes that African-American families are automatically treated in all analyses that focus on African-American as individuals. (2) This approach accepts uncritically the assumptions of the "deficit model" which attributes most of the problems of African-American families to internal deficiencies or pathologies. (3) Such a conventional perspective fails to incorporate new research findings and programmatic insights produced over the past two decades concerning African-American families, many of which contradict basic tenets of the deficit model, and (4) The traditional perspective fails to focus on positive policies, programs, services, self-help efforts and coping strategies that are successful in strengthening the functioning of the African-American family (Hill, 1993). To achieve balance, one must look at both the strengths and weaknesses of both middle and low-income African-American families. The African-American family is different in many respects, but does being different mean such families are deficient?

In contrast to the traditional frameworks used to portray African-American families, the framework employed by the **holistic perspective** is one in which the families are the central unit of analysis. Since families continue to be the preeminent mechanism for socialization and for pooling resources for upward mobility among African-Americans and Whites (Moroney, 1980; Duncan, 1984; Levy, 1987), it is essential that they should not be viewed as peripheral, which is one of the basic tenets of the traditional deficit model. Nearly a century ago, W.E.B. DuBois state and I quote: (using the political correct term of the day):

"We should seek to know and measure carefully all the forces and conditions that go to make up these different problems, to trace the historical development of these conditions and discover as far as possible the probable trend of further development. Without doubt this would

be difficult work, and it can with much truth be objected that we cannot ascertain, by the methods of sociological research known to us, all such facts thoroughly and accurately. To this objection it is only necessary to answer that however difficult it may be to know all about the Negro, it is certain that we can know vastly more than we do and that we can have our knowledge in more systematic and intelligible form. As things are, our opinions upon the Negro are more matters of faith than of knowledge. Scientific work must be subdivided, but conclusions which affect the whole subject must be based on a study of the whole. One cannot study the Negro in freedom and come to general conclusions about his destiny without knowing his history in slavery."

The **Holistic Perspective** is best suited for guiding this research due to the fact that it encompasses five components that are relevant to the study of African-American families. These five components includes: (1) diversity, (2) dynamism, (3) balance, (4) solutions, and (5) empiricism.

The purpose of this study was to investigate which variables are associated with positive outcomes and strengths in African-American families, as well as to ascertain which existing models and/or theories best depict the African-American family from a more positive perspective. Twenty African-American families participated in this qualitative study. Families resided in both central and southwest Arkansas. The snowball technique was used to select subjects for the study as well as parents who fit the definition of successful African-American families. The definition of successful African-American families was operationally defined to mean: Intact families who have a high regard for education, religious involvement, civic and community pride and high moral values.

The study consisted of three research questions:

(1) How do African-American families view themselves in terms of their strengths?

(2) How do African-American families view themselves in terms of weaknesses?

(3) What factors are perceived by African-American families as being important to help

their children succeed?

In terms of the first research question, responses ranged from "JESUS is the head of our family, we have had strong religious influences in our lives, we have always thought that God would help us to be successful in life. Our faith in God has been the main source of our strength as well as having a mate who shares the same moral and religious principles. The second research, which was, **How do African-American families view themselves in terms of weaknesses?** Weaknesses were defined by 18 of the families as the lack of a strong economic base within the African-American business sector. A few of the actual quotes derived from this question included the following responses: Not being able to provide their children with a "jump start" in life. A "jump Start" in life was defined as the parents inability to leave their children with property or other real estate that was paid off or established businesses so that their children wouldn't have to start from scratch. One father discussed how his father always used the phrase, as long as you've got some land, you've got something". His father would say, "Son if you buy land, you'll always have something because the population is increasing, but the land isn't getting any larger". Seventeen of the parents interviewed shared this sentiment. Another father talked about how he had stressed to his children not to become "social invalids". To him this meant not having to depend on welfare or other social programs.. Not having the skills or knowledge of how to teach their children about financial management was cited by 19 of the parents as being a contributing factor for this weakness.

The third research question which was, **What factors are perceived by African-American families as being important to help their children succeed?** Responses included: All twenty families agreed that children should not be handed their every wish. Explanations

should be given as to how hard they worked as parents to provide them with their basic needs. One father stated, "kids ought to made to earn some of the things they want". "Ain't no free rides in this life". My kids laugh at me when I tell them how far we had to walk to get to places. "I know that children today have many advantages that I didn't have as a child, and much of what is going on today I find difficult to grasp, but by the same token, if kids of today had to endure what I had to endure as I was growing up they wouldn't make it either. "I plan to continue to tell them about my hard life so they will appreciate this good life they enjoy now. Another family told their children that starting in the trenches is the beginning for building a solid foundation.

The results from this study indicate that African-American families hold in high regard the same values, morals and principles as families of other ethnic groups (Christopherson, 1977; Gary, 1983; Hill, 1972; Royce & Turner, 1980; Scanzoni, 1971; Willie, 1976). They are dedicate to maintaining stable families, have high expectations for their children as well as for themselves, involved with community and civic organizations which promotes the improvement of African-Americans. Many of the respondents were also involved in organizations that would increase awareness and understanding between races. These findings are supported by research by Billingsley (1968). All families interviewed stressed the importance of the role of the extended family in helping to provide a historical context to the family unit as well as being important to the nourishing process.

This research by no means is suggesting that only the strengths of African-American families be included in family life literature, but that a more balanced portrayal be included. When problems are cited, solutions should also be cited. As family life educators, academicians, and social scientist who are responsible for presenting the most accurate knowledge base for aspiring

family life professionals, this study could assist in the following ways: (1) by assisting professionals working with middle to upper middle income African-American families to develop greater understanding of such families and the factors which allow families to be successful, (2) will help to eliminate myths and negative perceptions concerning African-American families. The results of the research underscores the presence of a number of competencies in middle class African-American families., (3) the information presented can serve as a foundation for the development of social policies to address the needs and concerns of African-American families. (4) the present study helps in providing information on family enrichment programs for African-American families based on the experiences of "successful" African-American families, and for those interested in furthering theoretical and research efforts to understand the complex dynamics of the full range of African-American family life. (5) can serve as an empirical foundation for the design of curriculum in colleges and universities who offer degrees in Family Studies to assist future family scientists in working effectively with African-American families. Family scientists thus will have a more balanced and diverse frame of reference from which to work concerning the dynamics of African-American families, especially those in middle to upper middle income classes. In spite of the traditional expectations and perceptions held by the macro-society, there are African-American families committed to the idea of maintaining stable families and relations, who want the best for their children and have made note worthy contributions to society that go beyond athletics and the entertainment industry.

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